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ABSTRACT

Recently, training efforts have been undertaken to reduce the negative outcomes associated with increased verbal aggressiveness and accentuate the positive outcomes associated with increased argumentativeness within adolescent populations. This paper presents both positive and negative aspects of assessing aggressive communication predispositions in adolescents. More specifically, the paper briefly describes the use of self-report measures to assess change, the potential use of focus groups to inductively derive adolescent self reports concerning the traits of verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness, and the use of observers or "other reports" to evaluate both argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness. It asks what the implications for assessing the effectiveness of training programs (via self report) are, and suggests that, to answer this question, attention must be given to experimental designs and the impact of these designs on self-report measures, noting that if the behavioral objective of a training program is to reduce destructive aggressive communication by adolescents, then the experimental design used by the researchers will inevitably influence assessment of change, especially when change is based on the participants' self-reported perceptions. The paper states that the first step in developing curricular materials to reduce verbally aggressive behavior is the observation of communicative behavior in a variety of contexts, including home and school environments. It states that the second step is to use the information gathered from research to develop, test, and implement curricular materials for a variety of audiences and a variety of contexts. Contains 23 references. (NKA)

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Assessing Aggressive Communication in Adolescents:

Problems and Alternatives

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Assessing Aggressive Communication in Adolescents:

Problems and Alternatives

Aggressive communication has commanded an abundant amount of attention from scholars for almost twenty years. Recently, training efforts have been undertaken to reduce the negative outcomes associated with increased verbal aggressiveness and accentuate the positive outcomes associated with increased argumentativeness within adolescent populations. This paper will present both positive and negative aspects of assessing aggressive communication predispositions in adolescents. More specifically, this paper will briefly describe the use of self-report measures to assess change, the potential use of focus groups to inductively derive adolescent self-reports concerning the traits of verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness, and the use of observers or "other reports" to evaluate both argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness.

The use of self-report measures to assess verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness in adolescent populations has only recently become a research focus for communication scholars (Rancer, Kosberg, Whitecap, & Avtgis, 1997; Rancer, Avtgis, Kosberg, in press; Roberto & Finucane, 1997). The use of self-report measures has become a staple methodology for assessing communication predispositions. However, what are the implications for assessing the effectiveness of training programs (via self-report) specifically designed to reduce aggressive communication? To effectively answer this question, attention needs to be given to experimental designs and the impact of these designs on self-report measures. More specifically, if the behavioral objective of a training program is to reduce destructive aggressive communication by

adolescents, then the experimental design used by the researchers will inevitable influence assessment of change, especially when change is based on the participants self-reported perceptions.

Although the training indicated significant changes in the argumentative behavior of the adolescent, several issues concerning the validity of the pre-post-test design as well as measurement concerns warrant discussion. These issues are not only specific to the Rancer et al. (1997) study but are relevant concerns to all training programs that measure outcomes through experimental design.

External Validation of the Experimental Design

In the Rancer, et al. (1997) study there was a significant difference observed between experimental and control groups regarding pre and post test argument generation and self-reported trait argumentativeness. Inherent in the pre-post test experimental design is the validation concern of testing interaction (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). That is, some of the observed effects of increased argument generation and trait argumentativeness may be due to the fact that students were sensitized to the constructs (i.e., by taking the pretest). This threat to validity (that is present in the pre-post test design) can be controlled for by the utilization of the Soloman-Four experimental design. Replication efforts of the present study as well as newly developed training programs can greatly benefit from an experimental design that will control for all threats to external validity. Such efforts will yield effects that will be entirely a result of the experimental stimuli.

Internal Validation of the Experimental Design

The potential threats inherent in a pre-post test design are not only found in the ability to replicate the experiment but also in the experiment itself. These threats are more indicative of the experimental design of any specific training effort.

The adolescents in the Rancer et al. (1997) effort were not given instructions about speaking with others concerning the training. In fact, participants were encouraged to use the training materials on a regular basis. Therefore, the students who were assigned to either the control or experimental condition probably interacted about elements of the experimental stimulus. This potential threat to internal validity is known as diffusion (Campbell & Stanley, 1963; Cook & Campbell, 1979). Training programs, including those of these authors, need to deal with the dual goals of internal validity as well as encouraging participants (middle school adolescents, in this case) to practice the training materials on an ongoing basis. Or as an alternative, future research might consider sequestering participants from interacting about the experimental stimulus in order to control for diffusion.

Another possible threat to internal validity of the pre-post testing of training programs is the measure used to operationalize the constructs of interest. In this case, argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness were assessed at both pre and post training using the same measure. That is, the Adolescent Argumentativeness Scale and Adolescent Verbal Aggressiveness measures were administered before the training and again after the training. The process of using the same self-report measures for pre and post testing may have influenced peoples' responses (Campbell & Stanley, 1965; Cook & Campbell, 1979). This issue may be compounded by the fact that verbal aggressiveness

so prevalent in adolescents that respondents may have been influenced to give answers that make them "look good" or "cool" to others.

The salience of topic is another important consideration for adolescent training programs. The Rancer et al. (1997) effort used over crowding in the inner-city as the issue with which argument generation was assessed. Although the students in both the control and experimental conditions were exposed to the issues via their teacher, the children in this study were from more affluent suburbs. Therefore, the motivation to fully engage in argument generation may have been compromised. Further, one can deduce the relative unimportance any civic issue would have to an adolescent when kids face what they consider much more pressing issues, such as what they will wear to school tomorrow, or issues involving peer and parental pressures. Any effort for which motivation plays a central role (which is the vast majority of adolescent training efforts) must consider the relevance and salience of the topic to the target population.

Measurement Issues

The instruments with which we assess communication predispositions are always a prominent factor when discussing potential "problems" in assessment efforts. Both constructs have traditionally been operationalized through self-report measures. This is consistent with personality assessment in that a peoples' perceptions of self have been a reliable and valid indicator of general predispositions. The "face validity" of the Adolescent Verbal Aggressiveness Scale, the "face validity" of the Adolescent Argumentativeness Scale, salience of the topic for which the change in behavior was based in the training study (Rancer, et al., 1997), and other benefits and pitfalls of assessment warrant discussion.

The Adolescent Argumentativeness Scale and the Adolescent Verbal Aggressiveness Scale are measures that were developed Roberto and Finucane (1997) from the generalized trait Argumentativeness Scale (Infante & Rancer, 1982) and the generalized trait Verbal Aggressiveness Scale (Infante & Wigley, 1986). The adolescent versions of these measures are modified in terms of enhancing ease of wording, and in the way that the directions inform the respondents to complete the scale referencing an "argument with a friend." However in completing the scale, all items in both the argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness adolescent measures are worded to assess the general trait. For instance, an item from the adolescent verbal aggressiveness scale reads, "When people are very stubborn, I use insults to soften their stubbornness." It is only in the directions that adolescents are instructed to consider a specific relationship (i.e., friend). This confusion may contribute to the readability issues raised by Roberto and Finucane (1997) regarding the application to (pre)adolescents. In addition, while the readability of the original instruments have been improved for use by an adolescent population, we wonder if the "readability" of the instruments are sufficiently different from the originals to be fully understood by a population who may have difficulty with reading and comprehension?

Another potential problem in assessing aggressive communication behavior in adolescents deals with the association of the two traits among adolescent populations. Infante and Rancer (1982) in developing the Argumentativeness Scale, and Infante and Wigley (1986) in developing the Verbal Aggressiveness Scale argued that the two scales are theoretically and empirically distinct. In fact, Infante and Wigley (1986) reported that ARGgt and verbal aggressiveness were correlated -.04. However, it is quite possible that

at least among adolescent populations, adolescents have a difficult time distinguishing between an attack on a position (argumentativeness) from an attack on the self-concept (verbal aggressiveness). Indeed, some recent meta-analytic research on adults (Hamilton & Mineo, 1999) and some research on adolescents (Rancer, et al., 1997; Rancer, et al., in press; Roberto, 1996; Roberto & Finucane, 1997) suggests that argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness are moderately and positively correlated. For example, Rancer, et. al. (1997) observed a moderately positive correlation ($r = .29$, $p < .01$) between participants' post-training self-reports of ARGgt and VA. In a follow-up longitudinal study, Rancer, et al., (in press) obtained an even stronger correlation between ARGgt and VA ($r = .38$, $p < .01$).

One Alternative for Assessing Aggressive Communication in Adolescents - The Focus Group Interview

In the previous section we have outlined several problems associated with assessing aggressive communication in adolescents. In the next two sections we shall propose alternative approaches which may be productive in enhancing our understanding of argumentative and verbally aggressive behavior in adolescents. This section will identify one potentially fruitful alternative, the focus group interview.

With just a few exceptions, the focus group method of research has been largely ignored by communication researchers. Although this method of data collection has been used extensively in marketing research (Byers & Wilcox, 1991; Lederman, 1983, 1990) relatively few studies employing this method are seen in published communication research. One recent notable exception was the study by Avtgis, West, and Anderson (1998) who employed three focus groups to generate responses reflecting cognitive,

affective, and behavioral dimensions of relationship development and deterioration as proposed by Knapp.

The focus group interview (Merton, Fiske & Kendall, 1956) is a data-gathering technique which involves the use of in-depth, group interviews in which participants are selected because they are a purposive, although not necessarily representative, sample of a given population (Lederman, 1990, p. 117).

Focus group interviews, obviously a qualitative research technique, was developed to help explore the "why" behind the numbers obtained from polling and other types of quantitative techniques. As Lederman (1990) states, "the emphasis in the use of group interviews on their ability to generate data about the 'why' behind the behavior; the ability to ask the kinds of questions that surveys don't ask and that individual interviews, too, miss" (p. 117). The name itself, focus group, describes the concept that the groups are selected and "focused" in on a given topic about which they have information if shared collectively in a guided interview, can help us understand some concept better (Lederman, 1983).

The Focus Group Interview seems particularly well suited to assess a wide range of communication traits and behaviors. Indeed, Lederman (1983, 1990) asserts that "the focus group interview is a technique which generates a form of self-report data" (Lederman, 1990, p. 126). Lederman even argues that the focus group interview was ***conceived as another way of obtaining self-report data***. Rather than the report being provided in a paper and pencil measure such as the Argumentativeness (Infante & Rancer, 1982) and Verbal Aggressiveness (Infante & Wigley, 1986) Scales, the self-

report data in the focus group interview is provided in the course of a guided, structured, group discussion (Lederman, 1983, p. 234).

Assumptions of the Focus Group Interview Technique

Lederman, a pioneer in the use of focus group interview methods in communication research, suggest that there are five assumptions upon which the method is based: (1) that people themselves are a valuable source of information, including information about themselves; (2) that people can report on and about themselves, and that they are articulate enough to put into words their thoughts, feelings and behaviors; (3) that people need help in "mining" that information, a role served by the interviewer, or researcher who "focuses" the interview in the focus group interview; (4) that the dynamics of the group can be used to surface genuine information rather than creating a "group think" phenomenon; and (5) that the interview of the group is superior to the interview of the individual (Lederman, 1990, p. 118). Almost none of these assumptions is unique to this data-gathering technique.

The first assumption mentioned, that people are a valuable source of information about themselves, is a basic assumption of any form of self-report data. It presumes that people: (a) are able to recall and articulate their perceptions and feelings; (b) that they have the desire to be honest; and (c) that it is reasonable to suppose that they are capable of being honest in their responses. In using this particular type of data-gathering technique we assume that people can be used as the source of this information, that they will share that information if asked the right questions, and that we can trust their responses. We make the very same assumptions when we employ traditional paper and pencil measures to obtain self-report data.

The second assumption, that people are able to identify, articulate, and deliver information they have about themselves is common to many self-report techniques, including other forms of data-gathering interview methods. The third assumption suggests that data-gathering is facilitated in this method by the use of an "interviewer" posing questions to help elicit information to address the research question(s), information that the interviewee may not be aware of the significance of (Lederman, 1990, p. 118). The fourth assumption argues that the data gathered by the technique may be somewhat more honest and less prone to social desirability bias because the technique encourages group members to share more with people "like themselves." The fifth assumption suggests that this method may yield "richer" data because the group provides a synergy which results in information that may not have been forthcoming from individuals responding separately in individual interviews. Participants, therefore, are able to bounce ideas off of each other and to stimulate thoughts and perceptions that may not have surfaced if the data-gathering was done individually.

Using the FGI to Assess Communication Traits - One Case Study

The use of the focus group interview to enhance our understanding of communication traits has already been employed. Lederman (1983) used the technique to assess how high communication apprehensives talk about communication apprehension and its effect on their behavior. It was felt that a rich, and at that time an untapped source of data about individuals' feelings, thoughts, and beliefs could (and perhaps, should) come from those who suffer from communication apprehension. Specifically, Lederman (1983) wanted to "gain insight into the high communication

apprehensives' point of view about their feelings about talking, not talking, other behavior, and the characterization of high CA itself, as measured by the PRCA-25.

A large lecture, introductory course was used as the population from which to select participants for the focus group interview. The PRCA-25 was administered to the group, along with a survey which asked participants' to indicate how they feel about talking with people, participating in a small group discussion, and how they would feel about participating in a discussion in which they would talk about their "feelings about talking."

Students' who scored as high CA's (as measured by the PRCA-25), and who also indicated on the other instrument that they would be willing to participate in a discussion were selected for the study. Thirty students emerged as high CA's, and twenty of those students volunteered for the discussions. Three focus groups were held, with the researcher acting as moderator. The interviews were recorded. The interview was conducted in a "directive mode," where the researcher used a topic guide, moderated the discussion as it emerged, used internal summaries and reflective questioning techniques, and encouraged participation on the part of all group members.

Using the Focus Group Interview to Assess Adolescents' Perceptions of Aggressive Communication

This method seems well suited to studying adolescents feelings, beliefs, and perceptions of argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness, in tandem with the administration of the Argumentativeness and Verbal Aggressiveness Scales. Three groups would be of particular interest in such an effort: ***(1) adolescents high in verbal***

aggressiveness, (2) adolescents low in argumentativeness, and, (3) adolescents high in argumentativeness.

A priority in the use of this method would be to craft an interview guide which attempts to: (1) assesses their feeling about engaging in, as well as being the recipient of, verbally aggressive behavior, (2) their feeling about engaging in argumentative communication, and, (3) the Argumentativeness and the Verbal Aggressiveness Scales as a valid reflection or measure of these two communication traits. In the Lederman (1983) study, all participants knew they had scored as high apprehensives at the time they entered the group. They learned from listening to each other that they had all scored that way. This allowed for a discussion of their evaluation of the PRCA. Thus, the validity of the instrument was assessed when all participants, without exception, indicated that they saw themselves this way.

Some assistance on developing an interview guide to assess beliefs and feelings about aggressive communication may already in place. One line of inquiry in research on aggressive communication has explored belief structures of individuals who vary in argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness in order to understand why individuals differ on these traits. Rancer, Baukus, and Infante (1985) identified several belief structures about arguing such as "hostility," "activity/process," "control/dominance," "conflict/dissonance," "self-image," "learning," and "skill." Rancer, Kosberg, and Baukus (1992) determined which beliefs best predict argumentativeness and which best discriminate high and low argumentatives. Infante, Riddle, Horvath, and Tumlin (1992) found differences in beliefs about verbal aggression between those who vary in the trait. Getting additional data from adolescents in a focus group encounter would do much to

validate those taxonomies, as well as providing perhaps a richer set of data which could conceivable uncover additional beliefs.

Reducing Verbal Aggression - Assessment And Implications For Curriculum Development

Roberto and Finucane (1997) note: "Disagreements are a pervasive part of a child's world" (p. 23). Also pervasive in a child's world are persistent instances of verbally aggressive behavior. These are not limited to references on television and radio in such shows as Howard Stern, Jerry Springer, Beavis and Butthead, The Simpsons, and South Park. It is not uncommon to hear public figures to refer to their opponents as "maggots," "idiots," and "worms"; last year Senator Dan Burton referred to President Bill Clinton as a "scumbag" during the Lewinsky debacle. In an article in The Chronicle of Higher Education, it was reported that a student called a professor as "a goddamned bitch" when the professor refused to change a grade; in another instance a professor was told, "who gives a s----" when he asked the class to solve an equation. Katula, Linhart, Sullivan, and Kosberg (1998) note:

> Especially in these times when personal and group identities often take preeminence over ideas and the content of one's character, the critical skill of being able to argue for or against a position on controversial issues is too often reduced to hurling epithets until the person retreats."

The research of Rancer, et al. (1997) revealed that a training program developed by the authors significantly increased both the students' general tendency to argue, as well as their ability to generate arguments for discourse. However, one unexpected finding of the study is the significant increase in levels of verbal aggressiveness. The authors offered several explanations and conjectures for the findings. One, discussed above, focuses on the prevalence of verbal aggressiveness in our society and that perhaps

adolescents view verbal aggressiveness as a sanctioned practice. A second area of speculation focuses on the content of the training program. Much of the content of the training program centered on the Inventional System as a means of generating arguments. The authors concluded that more time and attention was needed in the curriculum on verbal aggression and its deleterious effects. The authors note: "A restructuring of the training program would put more focus on interpersonal and relationally-oriented issues as they manifest themselves in conflict situations" (p. 283).

The next question to be addressed is how to develop a training program whose goal is to decrease verbal aggressiveness. Certainly there is much to learn from the numerous training programs available, particularly in the area of conflict resolution.

School administrators often add programs in conflict resolution and violence prevention to the curriculum when a violent episode occurs in the school and/or community and the parents/community leaders in the district demand some action. The program is most often pre-packaged curricular material, and taught to faculty either by an assigned teacher with little knowledge of the body of information in the 'alternative dispute resolution field' or an 'expert' for a short term in-service training. In both situations, the teaching staff is expected to bring the information back to the classroom.

Researchers are questioning the value of such school-based conflict resolution and violence prevention programs. Most evaluations of existing programs reveal little evidence of success. Webster (1993) reviewed the evaluation material of three widely used curricula and found "no evidence that such programs produce long-term changes in violent behavior or risk of victimization" (p. 127). Webster (1993) warns that promoting

these programs may hinder violence prevention by diverting attention and funding away from the economic and social programs that will ameliorate the situation.

Researchers at the University of Illinois reviewed existing research and concluded that:

> well intentioned efforts are being applied to many children and adolescents without indication of their effects.... Not only have programs that have been earnestly launched been ineffective, but some of our seemingly best ideas have led to worsening the behavior of those subjected to the intervention" (p. 4).

In his review of conflict resolution training programs, Webster (1993) observes: "One could rightfully argue that the lack of evidence that conflict resolution programs produce sustainable behavior change is due as much to inadequacies of the evaluations as to inadequacies of the programs" (p. 131).

In her evaluation on the effectiveness of adolescent health education curricula, Dryfoos (1993) concluded: "We cannot rely on brief classroom-based curricula to alter complex socially derived patterns of behavior" (pp. 793-795). Well designed programs, she notes, should include community wide strategies. While Dryfoos's research focused on prevention programs addressing such issues as delinquency, teen pregnancy, and substance abuse, similar conclusions can certainly be drawn for conflict resolution, as well as verbal aggression, programs.

Margot Welch of the Harvard Graduate School of Education concurs with Dryfoos and Webster in her belief that skill training, by itself does not change behavior in lasting ways. Though it is more likely to have more impact than discussion of facts alone, "discrete skill training in and of itself won't necessarily stay with the youngster in a stressful situation." For example, when challenged on the street after school, a child/adolescent may not always remember the strategies learned for de-escalating a

conflict situation because they have been not been habitually used. This is especially salient when you consider that a student spends about 10% of his/her time in school and 90% somewhere else.

Future Efforts

With the latter in mind, the major criticisms related to school based-skill training programs are understandable. But how are curricular materials to be developed that f on reducing verbally aggressive behavior? The first step is the observation of communicative behavior in a variety of contexts, including home and school environments. Using observational methods, it is possible to focus on the content of the communication and to use that information in developing curricular materials. Students spend approximately 90% of their time in school and at home, interacting with parents and teachers in a variety of contexts. Training these caregivers in observational methods would provide an alternative way of assessing the aggressive communication predispositions of adolescents. These methods of direct observation would also provide curriculum developers with significant information about adolescents' communicative behavior in a variety of situations, thereby providing the curriculum with the realism that current training efforts may lack.

A list of key questions designed to isolate and describe behavior was developed by Nachmias and Nachmias (1987, p. 301):

"1. What type of behavior is it?

2. What is its structure?

3. How frequent is it?

4. What are its causes?

5. What are its processes?

6. What are its consequences?

7. What are people's strategies?"

The second step is to use the information garnered from this research to develop, test, and implement curricular materials for a variety of audiences and a variety of contexts. Recall that a major critique of other training programs focused on the fact that they were school-based and did not address the myriad of situations faced by today's adolescents.

It is not the purpose of this discussion to describe, in detail, the naturalistic research methods that would be followed in implementing this proposal. Rather, it is important to emphasize that curricular materials must be developed in a context for changing on-going patterns of socially-derived behaviors, including verbally aggressive behavior.

The advocacy of other-report of behavior versus self-report in the assessment of argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness gives rise, however, to other measurement concerns. The use of raters (such as parents or teachers) to assess or code student behaviors assumes that the rater knows the following: a) the intent of the actor, b) the impact of the utterance on the other party, and c) the observed behavior is the functional equivalent of the predisposition. For example, profanity has been traditionally viewed as a verbally aggressive utterance. However, the adolescent population may use profanity simply to express other feelings than those associated with attacking another's self-concept. Would such intent be detectable by an other-report or outside rater?

Although the use of raters sounds promising, we must acknowledge the inherent problems in such a methodology such as inter-rater reliability and intra-rater variability. Both self and other reports of behavior continue to be valuable outcome assessment tools. The majority of training programs rely on such methods for assessment and determination of the relative success of the program. The caveat is simply to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of each methodology when operationalizing any construct. Perhaps incorporating self-report, other-report, and behavioral coding will provide the most accurate picture of an actors predisposition. However, practical concerns such as time, funding, and access may make such efforts, however theoretically logical, cumbersome.

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